

Yoga and Buddhism: Similarities and Differences

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(By David Frawley, Note: This article in various forms has been published by different magazines in the past like Yoga International and Hinduism Today, and been put on various websites.)

Yoga and Buddhism are sister traditions which evolved in the same spiritual culture of ancient India. They use many of the same terms and follow many of the same principles and practices. For this reason it is not surprising that many of us born in the West, particularly after an initial exposure, are apt to regard Yoga and Buddhist teachings as almost identical.

We may want to combine their teachings or practices accordingly, as if there were no real differences between them. The differences that have existed between the two systems historically, which have kept them apart as separate traditions, are less obvious to us in the West than are their commonalities. Or those who study one of these traditions may be inclined to see the other as a borrowing from it. Those who study Buddhism may find so much similarity in Yoga that they suspect a strong Buddhist influence on Yoga. Those who study Yoga may find so much similarity in Buddhism that they see a strong yogic influence on Buddhism.

However, the tendency to find commonality between these two great spiritual traditions is not limited to the West. Swami Vivekananda, the first great figure to bring Yoga to the West, examined the Buddhist Mahayana scriptures (Sutras) and found their key teachings and those of Vedanta that he followed to be ultimately in harmony. In recent years with the influx of Tibetan refugees into India, including the Dalai Lama, there has been a new dialogue between the two traditions that is bringing about greater respect between them. Tibetan Buddhists often appear at Hindu religious gatherings and partake in all manner of discussions.

Nor is the attempt to connect the two traditions limited to modern times. Various synthetic Hindu-Buddhist teachings have existed through history. Buddha himself was born a Hindu and some scholars have argued that Buddhism as a religion apart from Hinduism did not arise until long after the Buddha had passed away. A Shiva-Buddha teaching existed in Indonesia in medieval times, and for many Tantric Yogis it is difficult to tell whether they were Hindus or Buddhists. Buddha became accepted as an avatar of Vishnu for the Hindus during the medieval period, and most Hindus still consider that we live in the age of the Buddha-avatar. Most Hindus accept Buddha as a great teacher, even if they do not accept all Buddhist teachings.

Yet, similarities and connections aside, the two traditions have had their differences, which have not always been minor. Such synthetic trends did not exclude disagreements and debates between the two traditions. Nor did they ever succeed in fully uniting them. Their traditions and lineages remain separate to the present day. Generally the Hindu Yoga tradition sought to absorb Buddhism into itself by reinterpreting Buddha in a Vedantic light. Buddhism however strove to maintain its separate identity by stressing its disagreements with Vedic theism or the Vedic recognition of a higher Self. Most Hindu and Buddhist teachers, including those of the different Yoga schools of Hinduism and Tibetan Buddhists, have found it necessary to discriminate their doctrines, particularly on subtle levels of practice and insight. Refutations of Buddhist teachings are common in yogic texts and refutations of yogic and Vedantic teachings are common in Buddhist texts. So while we can honor the connections between these two systems, we cannot overlook their differences either.

The Yoga Tradition

By Yoga in the context of this examination we mean primarily the classical Yoga system as set forth by Patanjali in the Yoga Sutras, but as part of the greater Vedic tradition that Patanjali was part of. Patanjali has never been regarded in India as the founder of the Yoga tradition but simply the compiler of yogic teachings that long predated him. Patanjali, reflecting the older tradition, taught an eightfold (ashtanga) system of Yoga emphasizing an integral spiritual development including ethical disciplines (Yama and Niyama), postures (Asana), breathing exercises (Pranayama), control of the senses (Pratyahara), concentration (Dharana), meditation (Dhyana) and absorption (Samadhi).

This integral or eightfold approach to Yoga is common to most schools of Vedic and Hindu thought and practice. They occur in pre-Patanjali literature of the Puranas, Mahabharata and Upanishads, where the name Patanjali has yet to occur. The originator of the Yoga system is said to be Hiranyagarbha, who symbolizes the creative and evolutionary force in the universe, and is a form of the Vedic Sun God.

Yoga can be traced back to the Rig Veda itself, the oldest Hindu text which speaks about yoking our mind and insight to the Sun of Truth. Great teachers of early Yoga include the names of many famous Vedic sages like Vasishtha, Yajnavalkya, and Jaigishavya. The greatest of the Yogis is always said to be Lord Krishna himself, whose Bhagavad Gita itself is called a Yoga Shastra or authoritative work on Yoga. Among Hindu deities it is Shiva who is the greatest of the Yogis or lord of Yoga, Yogeshvara. Therefore, a comparison of classical Yoga and Buddhism brings the greater issue of a comparison between Buddhist and Hindu teachings generally, particularly relative to the Yoga and Vedanta side of Hindu dharma.

Some people, particularly in the West, have claimed that Yoga is not Hindu or Vedic but an independent or more universal tradition. They point out that the term Hindu does not appear in the Yoga Sutras, nor does the Yoga Sutra deal with the basic practices of Hinduism. Such readings are superficial. The Yoga Sutras abounds with technical terms of Hindu and Vedic philosophy, which its traditional commentaries and related literature explain in great detail.

The Yoga Sutras have always been regarded as one of the six systems of Vedic philosophy accepting the authority of the Vedas, Bhagavad Gita and Upanishads, which traditional commentators on the text have always brought in. Another great early Yogic text, the Brihatyogi Yajnavalkya Smriti, describes Vedic mantras and practices along with Yogic practices of asana and pranayama. The same is true of the Yoga Upanishads, of which there are several dozen. Those who study Yoga Sutras in isolation from this greater tradition are bound to make mistakes. The Yoga Sutras, after all, is a Sutra work. Sutras are short statements, often incomplete sentences that without any commentary often do not make sense or can be taken in a number of ways. So to approach the Yoga Sutras and the Yoga tradition, one must look at the entire context of the teachings, commentaries and authoritative texts, not just modern opinions on the matter.

Other people in the West, including many Yoga teachers, state that Yoga is not a religion. This can also be misleading, though it does have its point. Yoga is not part of any religious dogma proclaiming that there is only one God, church or savior as the only path. Yoga teachers from India have not insisted that their students formally become Hindus either. But Yoga is still a system deriving from the Hindu religion and is closely connected with all aspects of Hindu Dharma and much of Indian culture. Yoga does deal with the nature of the soul, God and immortality, which are the main topics of religion throughout the world. Its main concern is religious and certainly not merely exercise or health, though it is more concerned with the spiritual and mystical side of religion, not the mere belief or institutionalized aspect.

Though Yoga is one of the six schools of Vedic philosophy (sad darsanas), it is also used by all the rest of the six systems in various ways. Yoga is coupled with another of these six schools, the Samkhya system, which sets forth the cosmic principles (tattvas) that the Yogi seeks to realized. Nyaya and Vaisheshika, two of the other systems, provide the rational and philosophical training that Yoga teachers in India also followed. Purva Mimamsa or the ritualistic school was the basis of much of the Karma Yoga of the yogic system.

Uttara Mimamsa (also called Vedanta) is closely connected to Yogic traditions of Bhakti and Jnana Yoga, and their teachers have always used the eight limbs of Yoga. Most of the great teachers who brought Yoga to the modern world, like Swami Vivekananda, Paramahansa Yogananda, Sri Aurobindo, and Swami Shivananda, were Vedantins and emphasized Yoga-Vedanta.

These six Vedic systems were generally studied together. All adapted to some degree the methods and practices of Yoga. While we can find philosophical arguments and disputes between them, they all aim at unfolding the truth of the Vedas and differ mainly in details or levels of approach. All quote from Vedic texts, including the Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita and Puranas for deriving their authority.

Some Western scholars call these “the six schools of Indian philosophy.” This is a mistake. These schools only represent Vedic systems, not the non-Vedic of which they are several. In addition they only represent Vedic based philosophies of the classical era. There were many other Vedic and Hindu philosophical systems of later times. Yet even these later systems like Kashmiri Shaivism, the Hatha Yoga, Siddha Yoga and Nath Yoga traditions, frequently quote

from and accept not on the teachings of the Yoga Sutras, but those of the Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita as well.

Buddhism and Its Philosophy

The Buddhist schools, of which there are four in classical Indian philosophy, though they shared many ideas and with Vedic spirituality, like karma and rebirth, did not accept the authority of the Vedas and rejected a number of key Vedic principles. All Buddhist schools employ meditation but some add more specific yogic practices, like Pranayama and Mantra. Such systems may be called 'Buddhist Yoga' by modern writers. However, Yoga as a term is lacking in early Buddhist texts, particularly of the Theravadin type, and becomes prominent mainly in the Buddhist Tantric tradition that developed later, particularly as practiced in Tibet. Some Buddhists regard that Buddha was a great Yogi, particularly relative to the occult and psychic powers he was supposed to possess.

Buddhism has basically two varieties, as well as many subvarieties. The northern, Mahayana or "great vehicle" tradition prevails in Tibet, China and Japan and adjacent countries. This is the type of Buddhism that is most known and followed by the largest number of people in the world. It includes Chan, Zen, Buddhist Tantra, Vajrayana, and Dzog Chen. The southern, Theravadin, prevails in the south of Asia, Sri Lanka, Burma and Thailand. Vipassana is the most commonly known practice of Theravada Buddhism. Generally the Theravadin form is considered to be the older of the two forms of Buddhism. However, most Indian Buddhism, including the Sanskrit Buddhist Sutras, is of the Mahayana branch and has probably been best preserved in Tibet, where it has undergone a further development into Vajrayana.

There are some disagreements between these two main Buddhist lines. The Mahayana tradition calls the Theravadin tradition, the Hinayana, or "lesser vehicle." Many Theravadins consider that types of Mahayana Buddhism, particularly the Tibetan, are not truly Buddhist because they have mixed Buddhism with indigenous religious practices.

The Mahayana tradition, particularly in its Tantric forms, uses breathing exercises, mantras, visualizations and deities much like the Yoga tradition. The Theravadin tradition has less in common with Yoga, though it does use similar meditation and concentration methods. It generally rejects devotional worship and the use of deities such as occurs in Yogic paths. For example, Vipassana teachers have often criticized the use of mantra, which is common not only in Hindu Yogic traditions but in the Mahayana Buddhist teachings. In fact, it could be argued that Tibetan Buddhism, with its mantras, deities and yogic teachings, is closer to Hinduism in its teachings than to such Buddhist schools.

Buddhism grew up in a cultural base of Hinduism. For this reason Indian and Tibetan Buddhism have included Ayurvedic medicine, Hindu astrology, Sanskrit, the same rules of iconography and the same forms of temple worship, and other common factors as the Hindu tradition. A number of Hindu Gods and Goddesses, like Ganesh and Sarasvati, appear in the Buddhist tradition. Some figures like the Goddess Tara appear in both. Yet as Buddhism moved to other countries outside of India many of these connections were either lost or their basis forgotten.

Nepal has remained as one region of the Indian subcontinent in which both these religions have continued, though Nepal has a Hindu majority, a Hindu king and is officially a Hindu state. Yet in Nepal Hindu Yoga and Buddhist traditions have never been simply equated. Nepalese Hindus and Buddhist respect one another but seldom combine the teachings of these two different religions by way of their actual practices. They tend to follow one tradition or the other but seldom both.

Yoga

and

Meditation

Today Yoga is most known for its asana tradition or yogic postures, which are the most popular, visible and outward form of the system. Buddhism is known as a tradition of meditation, as in the more popular forms of Buddhist meditation like Zen and Vipassana. This is rather strange because Yoga traditionally defines itself as meditation, or calming the disturbances of the mind, not as asana, which is taught merely as an aid to meditation. In the Yoga Sutras, the classical text on Yoga, of which there are two hundred Sutras only three deal with asana, while the great majority deal with meditation, its theory and results. In the West we hear people talk of “Yoga and meditation,” yoga meaning asana or some other outer practice like pranayama. If one states this in India, one hears “Yoga and meditation, are they two?”

Unfortunately, many people who have studied Yoga in the West have learned only the asana or posture side of the teaching, not the meditation side. Some of them may therefore look to Buddhist teachings, like Zen or Vipassana, for meditation practices, not realizing that there are yogic and Vedantic forms of meditation which are traditionally not only part of the yogic system, but its core teaching! The cause for this often resides with Yoga teachers who have not studied the meditation side of their own tradition. Some have not been taught it as purely asana-oriented teachers have become more popular, no doubt owing to their appeal to the physically oriented Western mind.

There is nothing necessarily wrong with doing Yogic asanas and Buddhist meditation but one who is claiming to be a Yoga teacher and yet does not know the Yogic meditation tradition cannot claim to be a real Yoga teacher. We could compare them with someone who practices a Buddhist physical exercise system, like Buddhist martial arts, but on top of this does a non-Buddhist meditation system, and still claims to be a teacher of Buddhism! The real Yoga tradition has aimed at producing meditation masters, not merely beautifully flexible bodies. Most of the Yoga System of Patanjali is concerned with the science of meditation as concentration, meditation and Samadhi (Dharana, Dhyana, Samadhi). In fact in the beginning of the Yoga Sutras Yoga is defined as Samadhi or spiritual absorption.

Yoga and its related Vedantic systems include numerous types of meditation both with form and without. These include pranayama techniques like So’ham Pranayama or the various types of Kriya Yoga (like those taught by Yogananda), meditation on deities of all types and various devotional approaches, every sort of mantra from simple bija mantras like Om to long extended mantras like Gayatri, the use of yantras and other geometrical devices, diverse concentration methods, passive meditation approaches and active approaches like the Self-inquiry taught by

Ramana Maharshi. It is a rich meditation tradition of which the rich asana tradition is merely an aspect.

Philosophical Differences Between Hindu Yoga-Vedanta Traditions and Buddhism

There are Buddhist refutations of the different schools of Hindu philosophy, including Yoga and Vedanta, and a rejection of Hindu deities like Shiva and Krishna. There are similar Yoga-Vedantic refutations of the different schools of Buddhist philosophy, including the rejection of the omniscience of Buddha, criticism of the Buddhist view of the mind, and so on.

Buddhist scriptures themselves, both Mahayana and Theravadin, contain refutations of the Atman, Brahman, Ishvara, and the key tenets of Yoga and Vedanta, which are regarded as false doctrines. Note the Lankavatara Sutra, which is very typical in this regard. Refutation of Buddhist teachings does not occur in Hindu scriptures, which are largely pre-Buddhist but are common in the later literature. Many Vedantic, Sankhya and Yoga texts contain refutations of Buddhist doctrines, particularly those of the four classical schools of Buddhist philosophy, which are similarly regarded as untrue. Such criticism of Buddhist teachings occur in the main commentaries on the Yoga Sutras, that of Vyasa, and are common in Advaita or non-dualistic Vedanta.

Such critiques can be found among the works of the greatest Hindu and Buddhist sages like Shankara of the Hindus, and Nagarjuna and Aryadeva of the Buddhists. Relative to Yoga and Buddhism one of the most interesting interactions was between Ishvara Krishna (not Krishna of the Bhagavad Gita) and the Buddhist guru of Vasubandhu, the founder of the Vijñānavāda school. The debate was won by Ishvara Krishna and the record of his arguments, the Sankhya Karika was produced, which has become the main text on Samkhya. Vijñānavāda, also called Yogachara, is the closest Buddhist school to classical Yoga, but curiously was the Buddhist system most in conflict with it in philosophical debates.

There have been similar, but more limited debates within each tradition, with Advaita Vedanta critiques of other Hindu traditions like Sankhya-Yoga, or Buddhist Madhyamika critiques of Buddhist Vijñānavāda and other Buddhist traditions. The Indian tradition cherished debate as a means of finding truth and did not simply aim at superficial intellectual agreements. This tradition of free and open debate is alive not only in India but in Tibet. The Indian tradition never required intellectual uniformity but honored diversity, something we should also remember today. While we should be open and tolerant, we need not give up discrimination or clarity in thinking.

How Yoga and Buddhist Teachings Compare

Yoga and Buddhism are both meditation traditions devised to help us transcend karma and rebirth and realize the truth of consciousness. They see the suffering and impermanence inherent in all birth, whether it is animal, human or god, and seek to alleviate it through developing a higher awareness. Both emphasize the need to dissolve the ego, the sense of the me and the mine, and return to the original reality that is not limited by the separate self. Both traditions emphasize enlightenment or inner illumination to be realized through meditation.

Both systems recognize dharma, the principle of truth or natural law, as the basic law of the universe we must come to understand. Such dharmas are the law of karma and the unity of all sentient beings. Buddhism defines itself as Buddha dharma or the dharma of the enlightened ones, which is seen as a tradition transcending time or place. Yoga defines itself as part of the Hindu tradition called Sanatana Dharma, the universal or eternal dharma, which is not defined according to any particular teacher or tradition. Both traditions have called themselves Arya Dharma or the Dharma of noble men.

The main differences between the two systems are over their cosmic view and way of practice. Vedic systems are built upon fundamental principles like the Self (Atman), the Creator (Ishvara), and Godhead (Brahman). Buddhism rejects all such ontological principles as mere creations of the mind itself. In this regard Vedic systems are more idealistic and Buddhism systems more phenomenological.

Apart from such philosophical differences both systems share the same basic ethical values like non-violence, truthfulness, non-attachment and non-stealing. The vows that Buddhist monks take and those that monks and sadhus take in the Yoga tradition are the same, so are those of Jain monks.

The Absolute

Vedanta defines the absolute as a metaphysical principle Being-Consciousness-Bliss, or Brahman in which there is perfect peace and liberation. Buddhism does recognize an Absolute, which is non-dual and beyond all birth and death. However, Buddhism generally does not allow it any definition and regards it as void. It is sometimes called the Dharmakaya or body of dharma, though Sanskrit Buddhist texts never call it Brahman.

Self **and** **not-Self**

Buddhism generally rejects the Self (Atma or Purusha) of Yoga-Vedanta and emphasizes the non-Self (anatman). It says that there is no Self in anything and therefore that the Self is merely a fiction of the mind. Whatever we point out as the Self, the Buddhists state, is merely some impression, thought or feeling, but no such homogenous entity like a Self can be found anywhere. Buddhism has tended to lump the Self of Vedanta as another form of the ego or the misconception that there is a Self.

The Yoga-Vedanta tradition emphasizes Self-realization or the realization of our true nature. It states that the Self does not exist in anything external. If we cannot find a self in anything it is no wonder, because if we did find a self in something it would not be the self but that particular thing. We cannot point out anything as the Self because the Self is the one who points all things out. The Self transcends the mind-body complex, but this is not to say that it does not exist. Without the Self we would not exist. We would not even be able to ask questions.

Yoga-Vedanta discriminates between the Self (Atman), which is our true nature as consciousness, and the ego (generally called Ahamkara), which is the false identification of our

true nature with the mind-body complex. The Atman of Vedanta is not the ego but is the enlightened awareness which transcends time and space.

However a number of Buddhist traditions, particularly traditions outside of India, like the Chan and Zen traditions of China, have used terms like Self-mind, one's original nature, the original nature of consciousness or one's original face, which are similar to the Self of Vedanta.

Mind and Self

Buddhism defines reality in terms of mind and often refers to ultimate truth as the One Mind or original nature of the mind. In Yoga, mind (manas) is regarded as an instrument of consciousness which is the Self. It speaks of the One Self and the many minds which are its vehicles. For it mind is not an ultimate principle but an aspect of creation.

If we examine the terms mind and Self in the two traditions it appears that what Yoga criticizes as attachment to the mind and ego is much like the Buddhist criticism of the attachment to the self, while what Vedanta calls the Supreme Self is similar to the Buddhist idea of the original nature of the Mind or One Mind. The Self is the unborn, uncreate reality similar to what Buddhism refers to as the transcendent aspect of Mind. The enlightened mind which dwells within the heart of the Buddhists (Bodhicitta) resembles the Supreme Self (Paramatman) which also dwells within the heart. Yet these similarities aside, the formulations and methodologies of the two systems in this regard can be quite different. Classical Indian Buddhist texts do not make such correlations either, but insist that the Vedantic Self is different than the One Mind of Buddhism.

God or the Creator

The yogic tradition is based upon a recognition of, respect for and devotion to God or the creator, preserver and destroyer of the universe. One of its main principles is that of surrender to God (Ishvara-Pranidhana), which is said to be the most direct method to Self-realization. Some degree of theism exists in the various Yoga-Vedanta teachings, though in Advaitic systems Ishvara is subordinated to the Self-Absolute, which transcend even the Creator. This is perhaps the main point of difference between Yoga and Buddhism. Buddhism rejects God (Ishvara) or a cosmic lord and creator. It sees no need for any creator and considers that living beings arise through karma alone. The Dalai Lama recently noted that Buddha is similar to God in omniscience but is not a creator of the universe.

Yet some modern Buddhist teachers use the term God and make it equivalent to the Buddha-nature. There is also the figure of the Adi-Buddha or primordial Buddha in some Buddhist traditions who resembles God. The Buddha appears as God not in the sense of a theological entity but as the Divine potential inherent in living beings, but is similarly looked upon as a great being who is prayed to for forgiveness of misdeeds.

Karma and Rebirth

Both systems see karma as the main causative factor behind rebirth in the world. However, in Buddhism karma is said to be a self-existent principle. Buddhism states that the world exists owing to the beginningless karma of living beings. In the Yoga tradition, however, karma is not a self-existent principle. The world is created by God (Ishvara), the creative aspect of consciousness. Karma as a mere force of inertia and attachment cannot explain the creation of the world but only our attachment to it. Karma is regarded as a force dispensed by God, which cannot exist by itself, just as a law code cannot exist without a judge. However some other Vedic systems, also, like Purva Mimamsa put more emphasis upon karma than upon God.

Yoga recognizes the existence of a Jiva or individual soul who is reborn. Buddhism denies the existence of such a soul and says that rebirth is just the continuance of a stream of karma, not any real entity.

The Figure of the Buddha

All Buddhist traditions go back to the Buddha and most emphasize studying the life of the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni. The Vedic tradition, on the other hand, recognizes many teachers and there is no one teacher that everyone must follow or look back to. There is no single historical figure like the Buddha that dominates the tradition or whom all must follow, honor or worship. Hinduism has accepted Buddha as a great teacher but it has included him among its stream of many other teachers, gurus and avatars.

The term Buddha itself is common in Vedic teachings, as it is a common Sanskrit term meaning wise, awake, aware or enlightened. When Buddhism is referred to in Hindu literature it is called Bauddha Dharma or Saugata Dharma, as there is nothing in the term Buddha in Sanskrit that refers to a particular person or religion. While Hindus make Buddha into an avatar, in Buddhism Buddha cannot be an avatar because Buddhism has no God that Buddha could manifest. If Buddha is an avatar in Buddhism it is of the enlightened mind, not of the Creator.

Nirvana

Both systems regard Nirvana or mergence in the Absolute as a primary goal of practice. However in the Buddhist tradition, particularly the Theravadin, Nirvana is generally described only negatively as cessation. It is given no positive appellations. In the Vedic tradition Nirvana is described in a positive way as mergence into Brahman or Sacchidananda, Being-Consciousness-Bliss, the realization of the infinite and eternal Self, called Brahma Nirvana. Yet both systems agree that this truth transcends all concepts. Vedanta describes Nirvana as freedom or liberation (Moksha). This term does not occur in Buddhism which does not accept the existence of any soul that can be liberated.

Devotion and Compassion

Yoga with its recognition of God emphasizes devotion and surrender to God (Ishvara-pranidhana) as one of the main spiritual paths. It contains an entire Yogic approach based on devotion, Bhakti Yoga, through which we open our hearts to God and surrender to the Divine Will. As Buddhism does not recognize God, devotion to God does not appear as a Buddhist path.

That is why we don't find any significant tradition of great devotees and singers of Divine Love in Buddhism like Chaitanya, Ramakrishna, Tulsidas or Mirabai in the Hindu tradition.

Buddhism does recognize devotion to the Buddha or faith in the Buddha-mind. However devotion to great teachers or to functions of the enlightened mind does not quite strike the human heart with the same significance as devotion to the Divine Father and Mother of the Universe, the creator, preserver and destroyer of all, which requires a recognition of God.

Buddhism has developed the role of the Bodhisattva, the enlightened one who stays on after enlightenment to teach and guide living beings. As according to Yoga God and all the sages merged in him are ever present to help all beings, so there is no need for such a special Bodhisattva vow. Yoga values compassion as an ethical principle, however, and says that we cannot realize our true Self as long as we think that we are separate from other creatures.

Gods and Goddesses/ Buddhas and Bodhisattvas

Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, technically speaking, are not deities or Gods and Goddesses. They are not forms of the Divine Father and Mother and have no role in creating, preserving and destroying the universe. They are not the parents of all creatures but merely wise guides and teachers. They are often described as great beings who once lived and attained enlightenment at some point in time and took various vows to stay in the world to help save living beings.

For example perhaps the greatest Buddhist Goddess, Tara is such a Bodhisattva, an enlightened person – not the Divine Mother like Durga or Kali of Hinduism – but a great enlightened sage who has continued to exist in the world to help living beings. She is not the Goddess or a form of God as the universal creator but a personal expression of the enlightened mind and its power of compassion. There are also meditation Buddhas (Dhyani Buddhas), who represent archetypes of enlightenment.

Yet though the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are not forms of God, they can be prayed to provide grace and protection. For example, the Bodhisattva Tara was thought to save those in calamities. Worship of various Bodhisattvas is called Deity Yoga in the Tibetan tradition.

Summary

If we can equate the One Mind of the Buddhists with the One Self of Vedanta, make Buddha and God the same and give the Buddha the power of creation of the universe, and make other such correlations, both traditions could be synthesized at least at a philosophical level, even though differences of lineages and practices could continue.

I have found that many people in the West who consider themselves to be Buddhists are really Vedantic in their view. While they accept karma and rebirth, they also accept the existence of God as the Creator, the higher Self and an Absolute of Pure Being. These are the Ishvara, Atman and Brahman of Vedantic thought, which classical Buddhism does not directly accept.

Choosing a Path

There are a number of people in the West today, and even in India, who are combining Yoga and Buddhism, as well as less related traditions. Some people may try to follow gurus in both traditions (sometimes without the approval of the teachers). Of course, teachings which are common to both traditions like non-violence are obviously easy to correlate.

It is also quite easy for Buddhists to use Yoga asanas or pranayama, the outer aspects of Yoga teachings into their practice. It may be difficult to meditate upon the Supreme Self of Vedanta, while meditating upon the non-Self of Buddhism. The Buddhist approach requires doubting that there is any self at all. The Vedantic approach requires complete faith in the Self and merging everything into it. Above all it is hard to maintain certain devotional approaches in a Buddhist context where there is no real God or Creator.

Generally, gurus either within Vedic or Buddhist traditions require that their disciples emphasize their particular teachings. In this regard, they may not accept their followers combining teachings and practices from other gurus and traditions, particularly those of different orientations. In this eclectic age, many people do some synthetic experimentation combining different spiritual paths and teachings according to their inclinations or inspirations. This is bound to continue and may prove fruitful in some instances, particularly when one is still searching out one's path. Yet it frequently gets people lost or confused, trying to mix teachings together they do not really understand.

Jumping back and forth between teachers and traditions may prevent us from getting anywhere with any of them. Superficial synthesis, which is largely a mental exercise, is no substitute for deep practice that requires dedicated concentration. The goal is not to combine the paths but to reach to the goal, which requires taking a true path out to the end. While there maybe many paths up to the top of a mountain, one will not climb far cross-crossing between paths. Above all it is not for students on the path to try to combine paths. It is for the masters, the great lineage bearers in the traditions, to do so, if this is necessary.

Honoring All Paths: Following Our True Path

Today we are entering into a global age that requires the development of a global spirituality. This requires honoring all forms of the inner quest regardless of where and when they come from, even if our own inclinations are different. The unity of truth cuts across all boundaries and breaks down all divisions between human beings. It is crucial that such meditation traditions as Yoga and Buddhism form a common front in light of the needs of the global era. All such true spiritual traditions face many common enemies in this materialistic age. Their common values of protecting the earth, non-violence, recognition of the law of karma, and the practice of meditation are perhaps the crucial voice to deliver us out of our present crisis.

But in coming together the diversity of teachings should be preserved, which means not only recognizing their unity but respecting their differences. This is the same issue as that of different cultures. While we should recognize the unity of humanity, we should allow various cultures to preserve their unique forms, and not simply throw them all into one big melting pot, in which all their distinctions are lost.

True unity is universality that fosters a creative multiplicity, not a uniformity that reduces everything to a stereotype. Truth is not only One but Infinite and cannot be reduced to any final forms. Pluralism is also true as each individual is unique and we should have a broad enough view to allow others to have contrary opinions. As the Vedic Rishis stated, "That which is the One Truth the seers teach in diverse ways." This is to accommodate all the different types and levels of souls.

While we should honor all paths, we do need to follow a single path to the goal. Hopefully, that path will be broad, but every path must have some guidelines and not every path will work for everyone.